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## THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY <sup>1</sup>

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THE most important question which a man has to decide in this world is that of his work in life. The majority of men must settle this problem in the light of conscience and common sense, their knowledge of their world, what can be done and what needs to be done in the world, and their knowledge of themselves, their natural inclinations and abilities.

The broad initial option lies between business and the professions. The opportunities in the business world are perfectly apparent. There is above all else the zest of the great game, so dear to the strenuous temper of America. The prospects for a successful, absorbing, and useful life-work in business or industry are so clear that such a career needs no advocates. It should merely be noted, however, that although the single individual may enter business with a social conscience and with altruistic motives and plans, he finds himself in a world that is primarily operated with a view to private gain.

The claim of the four major professions — the law, medicine, teaching, and the ministry — rests upon an entirely different premise. The professional man enjoys certain social recognitions and privileges in modern society which are not accorded the business man. And although, man for man, the broker or banker is often a more high-minded person than the doctor or teacher, it still remains true that the professions as a whole have a certain moral rating of their own, which is in advance of the moral rating of the ranks of trade and industry.

The reason for this felt and recognized distinction is clear and valid. The members of every great profession are organ-

<sup>1</sup> The Dudleian Lecture, given at the Harvard Union, May 1, 1922.

ized primarily around the principle of service. Let me quote from a Balliol don at Oxford, on this basic distinction between the status of the business man and that of the professional man:

A profession may be defined most simply as a trade which is organized, incompletely, no doubt, but genuinely, for the performance of function. It is a body of men who carry on their work in accordance with rules designed to enforce certain standards both for the better protection of its members and for the better service of the public. All professions have some rules which protect the interests of the community. The rules themselves may sometimes appear to the layman arbitrary and ill-conceived. But their object is clear. It is to impose on the profession itself the obligation of maintaining the quality of service, and to prevent its common purpose being frustrated through the undue influence of the motive of pecuniary gain upon the necessities or cupidity of the individual. The difference between industry, as it exists today, and a profession is, then, simple and unmistakable. The former is organized for the protection of rights, mainly rights to pecuniary gain. The latter is organized, imperfectly indeed, but none the less genuinely, for the performance of duties.<sup>1</sup>

Every profession seeks to safeguard its own standard by two sets of requirements. The first demands the fulfilment of an initial training and discipline. The second requires subsequent conformity to the ethics of the profession. In the practice of our modern professions candidly commercial, competitive, and gainful practices which would pass unnoticed and unrebuked in industry, trade, or politics, are prohibited and disciplined. Professional men, for example, are tacitly prohibited from advertising. They are not expected to prescribe courses of conduct or treatment for their clients in which they themselves have a prospective money interest. Such actions are reckoned as "unprofessional conduct," and lay their author open to discipline by the profession as a whole, or in the extreme instance to dismissal from the profession altogether.

Nothing gives us greater cause for hope as to our world, at a time when optimism is neither cheap nor easy, than the steadily rising standards of initial professional requirement and subsequent professional practice. We live at a time in the world's history when most of the currencies of idealism have been debased, either by paper inflation without reference to hard facts, or by disillusionment and cynicism. It means very much

<sup>1</sup> R. H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society*.

to any man to find at hand a way of life where moral ideals are not only still recognized, but where they are more than holding their own. It takes more of a man and a better man today to practise a modern profession than it ever took before. This means that the professions as a whole hold out a welcome and an increasing opportunity to the man who chooses a life-work guided primarily by the unselfish desire to be of service to his world.

We are concerned in this lecture with a single one of the major professions, that of the Christian ministry. It is the least understood and the least often claimed of the "Big Four." The choice of any one of the other three professions no longer implies indifference to religion or neglect of religion. And the choice of the ministry no longer assures a monopoly of religious purpose and privilege. Teaching, medicine, and law rest today upon certain fundamental moral premises and open certain concrete religious opportunities, which make of them all ministries in a very real degree. They have pre-empted many duties that once fell to the ministry alone. And it is impossible to say just where the work of the modern doctor, teacher, and lawyer ends and that of the minister begins. I came away one night from a hospital room with a surgeon who had been making a losing fight for the life of a patient, and who turned away knowing that he had lost. I asked him what he thought was in store for that girl who would cross the border before morning. He said, "I do not know. That is your business. Our professions do not overlap. You enter the room when I go out, and we meet at the door in passing, that is all." Most doctors would feel that while this was a severely scientific interpretation of the practice of surgery, it was not fully human, and that it was not true to the best traditions of the profession. But it represents, perhaps, the broad initial distinction between the realm in which the minister practises and the realms occupied by members of the other professions. They deal with the world of known facts, primarily. The minister deals with the marginal world of the unknown. They practise in the world of seen things already staked out and possessed by knowledge. He ventures by those intuitions which we call

faith, into realms of which we have no certain knowledge, and yet which concern us quite as truly as the colonies of the human mind conquered and administered by scientific certainty.

It is this initial difficulty of defining accurately the distinctive duties of the minister which makes the call to the ministry to young men of today a vague and casual call. The first question about the ministry to be stated and answered is, therefore, a very concrete one, "What has a minister to do in the modern world?" The duties of a Christian minister are twofold. They always have been twofold and they always will be. They consist of his public ministry and his private pastoral work in a parish. Both of these duties must be generously interpreted. The first includes the conduct of worship, the administration of sacraments, where they are observed, and preaching. It also extends out into the community at large, where the minister is expected to appear and to stand on countless public occasions as the recognized spokesman for one of the major concerns of human life, namely, religion. And after all, as Huxley used to say, there are only two things permanently worth bothering about in this life, religion and politics. In the pastoral relationship the minister's parish begins by making him the guide, philosopher, and friend of a certain limited number of human beings, and ends by making him a kind of social engineer concerned with the general human problem of his city or town.

It is widely felt, today, that these duties are more or less superfluous, and that the ministry is in danger of degenerating into a parasitic order, fattening off the community, but putting nothing back into the community. This feeling is very strong with the outspoken economic radicals. And it is vaguely felt by all those to whom the material goods are the most real values, and who wonder what religion is all about. Of what good is the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper? That is a hard question to answer. It can best be answered by asking another question, Of what good is any symbol and symbolic act? Of what good is guard-mount, and a flag, and a sunset gun? As to the work of preaching the minister no longer enjoys a monopoly of culture and learning as he did in earlier days. He does

not speak with the authority that once he did, either as the voice of a finally and completely revealed religion or as the principal possessor in his community of human learning.

His predicament has been honestly and accurately stated by a modern essayist:

No mariner ever enters upon a more uncharted sea than does the average human being born into the twentieth century. Our ancestors thought they knew their way from birth through all eternity: we are puzzled about the day after tomorrow. Ministers are as bewildered as the rest of us, perhaps a little more so. For they are expected to stand up every week and interpret human life in a way that will vitalize human conduct. To ask the clergy to find adequate meaning in this era is to expect each minister to be an inspired thinker.

The major problems of the modern ministry rest on the fact that the minister is primarily concerned with those aspects of human life which are at once the most important and yet the most difficult to define and to appraise. Just as a man's property at any moment is divided into tangible assets which can be realized at a moment's notice, and the intangibles which he cannot get his hand on for the time being, so a man's experiences divide themselves into the tangibles and the intangibles. Most of our work-a-day life is concerned with the tangibles. Religion is primarily concerned with the intangible. And the initial difficulty which religion has to face in modern America is the plain fact that the average man is impatient of the unseen and the intangible and inclined for the sake of efficiency to commit himself in his life's interest and work to the world of tangible facts and values.

The appeal of medicine, for example, as against the ministry, at the present moment is the appeal of a life of service in the tangibles as against a life of service with the intangible. A surgeon cuts out a malignant growth from the body cavity. If he is a normally trained man he knows what he is doing at every turn of the operation, and when he has finished he knows exactly what has been done. And the patient either recovers or dies. The surgeon can check himself up day by day, because his problems, though often obscure and always delicate, are also tangible. But the minister preaches a sermon or

talks with some one in trouble, and he never knows just what he achieves. For the world in which he works is not one that can be measured with a watch or a micrometer or a yardstick or scales. He is speaking to men's points of view, their tempers of life, their hopes and fears. But this does not mean that he is not dealing with a real world, only that its realities are too subtle to be appraised with the more obvious aspects of experience.

And this does not mean that the intangibles are not important; on the whole the more important aspect of life. A grim bit of literary realism came out of the war, a few years gone, in which there was a painfully vivid account of a hand-to-hand bayonet encounter. One of the combatants finally succeeded in driving his bayonet through the body of the other. "All of a sudden," runs the record, "the adversary's face turned absolutely smooth, as if the cold iron in his body had chilled his fury, his eyes opened wide in astonishment, and he looked at me as if to ask in reproach, 'What are you doing?'"

Some such expression as just that, of almost childish perplexity, is to be seen on the face of our time. It is no answer to say crudely, "I am driving a bayonet through you." That is an obvious and gratuitous insult. The answer to that question in all of its aspects lies in the realm of ideas and moral values. Nor are the answers of a narrowly materialistic social service to such questions any more satisfactory than the answers of candidly brutal materialism on a battle field. For, as a fine-tempered modern Englishman has said of much of the humane work of the time, "When everybody is properly housed and clothed and fed, the problem still remains what to do with life, a problem to which they have no answer to whom philanthropy is all of life."

Now the whole significance of religion in history and in human experience lies in the fact that it attempts to answer just that type of question. "What are you doing with life — your own life and that of the other man?" Religion has very little meaning or worth to the man who does not feel the urgency of problems like that. Apart from such an interest it may be a pleasant incidental decoration for living, one of the luxury-

trades that is sanctioned with good-humored tolerance. But it is not a matter of vital concern to the man who really does not care what he is doing with his own life, or what he is doing to the other man. But to those who do care about these matters, because somehow they have to care in spite of themselves when it would be easier and perhaps pleasanter not to care, religion becomes more and more imperative and inevitable because it is pledged not to stop short of final answers.

Now the ministry is a profession which is concerned with discovering and stating adequate working answers to these final questions of life. It has no monopoly of these interests as against the rights of other men to care and think about these things. But it is a life-work devoted to the study of these matters at first hand, as they arise in a man's own life and in that human laboratory which is his parish. It really has no other reason for existence. And everything it says and does, not only with its lips but in its life, ought to be a suggested answer to problems of that nature.

What constitutes a "call to the ministry"? It is no mystical voice or emotional urge merely. It is above all else, at the present moment, the inner necessity which a man finds laid hard upon him to get, first of all, some answer to these problems in his own life. And this call is not primarily a call from a church, or from a creed. It is the imperious moral command of circumstance. It is the voice of God speaking to his own reasonable conscience. It is the necessity he feels to find out why he is here, what it all means, and what he ought to do. Beyond that it is the call of troubled and perplexed human beings round about, asking for help in living, at the point where help is hardest to find, and yet when found means the most, the kind of help that comes from our deepest companionships in human experience. And any man who feels this necessity and hears these human voices has a sufficient call to the ministry.

If we were to recast the conception of the ministry in the familiar terms of present-day life, we might say that the modern minister is a research worker set aside by preoccupied men to study the realm of human motives and human values, and to venture fresh answers to the question, "What are we doing



with life?" Ultimately, he is the man who is trying to win the power and to give others the power to say "God" in all the experiences of life. History, in the fortunes of its great systems of thought, conduct, and organized social life, reveals a good many ways of saying "God." The minister must know the world's ways of saying "God" in broad outline, and must be prepared to reinterpret them in the light of present conditions. But the dead hand can never guide the living present. And no minister seeks simply to lay the dead hand on the perplexed living. He takes his start, not from the authority of the past, but from the perplexity and need of his own life and his own time. He cannot escape the thought with which Lord Bryce concluded his long study of democracy: "The civilized peoples seem to be passing into an unpredicted phase of thought and life." And he realizes that the letter of old creeds will not be able to make that transition. Old answers to the riddle of life can never entirely satisfy new conditions. And the minister today is the research worker set aside to deal with the fundamental questions of human values and human duties in the terms in which they state themselves in this new time.

Many a man who feels the pressure of these questions, and who recognizes the call to the ministry which they bring to him, will wonder whether he is qualified to enter the ministry. College men are confused about what they believe today, and painfully conscious of the fact that their creed is a brief and imperfect one as measured by the standards of conventional and orthodox theology. They hesitate to put themselves in a false position by entering a profession which seems to commit them to more than they can believe or accept. What constitutes theological qualification for entering the ministry under such conditions?

It seems to me perfectly clear that two broad convictions warrant a man in entering the ministry. The first conviction is this, that religion holds a better promise of satisfactory answers to the riddle of life than any other human interest. And the second more or less follows from it, that Christianity is the best and most adequate religion the world has thus far known. This is not sectarianism, nor orthodoxy. It is the

testimony of the common conscience. William James used to say that Christianity was the completest of the religions man has known. Josiah Royce called it man's most important glimpse of the homeland of the human soul. George Bernard Shaw adds, in characteristic vein, that although we crucified Christ on a stick two thousand years ago we have never been able to get away from the conviction that he got hold of the right end of that stick, and that if we were better men we might try his way. If a man is convinced of those two matters it seems to me he has entire and sufficient warrant for entering the Christian ministry in some church of his choice and preference. I cannot suppose that any man would think of entering the ministry with less of a creed than that. I do not believe that any church can well ask of a man at the beginning of his life more of a creed than that. Religion is the best answer to the final problems of life. And Christianity is the best religion that we know anything about as yet.

Now a good half of a minister's life is spent in preaching and getting ready to preach. And it is as a preacher that the minister is most characteristically known in the community. What is preaching today? It certainly is not re-echoing at second hand the thoughts of other men. And it is not thundering out old precepts and platitudes on the strength of a remote past.

Preaching at the present time is primarily a process of thinking aloud about life. It takes its start with the life of our own time, men's perplexities and needs. We have been told recently that the war discovered a vast fund of "inarticulate religion" in the rank and file of human life. Inarticulate religion is religion which has never really become conscious of itself, found itself, and got itself stated out in the open. The case for preaching at the present time rests on the inarticulate religion of the average man. A surgeon friend once said to me of his minister, "What really interests and helps me in that man is his ability to put into words what I have always wanted to say and have always felt ought to be said, and yet have never been able to say by myself. And that is a very great gift." That, after all, is what all art and every classic does for us. It says what we want to say and know ought to be said, and yet

cannot say ourselves. That is why pictures and music and plays have a power over us. They help us to find ourselves. And this is the first thing the modern preacher has to do, to help dumb and perplexed men say out what is in them. It is told of William James that the student came out of his classroom feeling not, What a great man James is, but, How great I might be, if I only knew myself and found myself. That was a fine tribute to a great teacher. Now good preaching gets just that reaction. In this fallen world the preacher cannot always be the clear voice of God twice every week. But he can always be the voice of the people, trying to find and express themselves.

In the next place the preacher is trying to change men's point of view. And there is confessedly no hope for the future of civilization today, unless men's points of view are changed. There is no contribution which a man can possibly make to this generation so important and so absolutely essential as to help, even in the slightest way, to change men's way of thinking about the values of human life and the organization of human society. If our world is to be saved from suicidal disintegration it must discover afresh its communities of interest. And of all possible bonds of human union the thought of God is the surest and the strongest. Nothing so much needs to be said to the modern world as this, "One is your Father and all ye are brethren."

Teaching mathematics, healing diseases, discovering the causes and cure of cancer, getting a more stable banking system, raising the level of court procedure, limiting armaments, and refining the rules of war are all important. But of themselves they fall short of the final thing which has to be done, if civilization is not to go down in ruins, and that is to change men's points of view. The trouble with our age is that in its purely mechanical and technical skill it has far outrun its social sciences and its moralities. An Oxford teacher said with utter truth that the catastrophe of the war was made possible by, and was due entirely to, our preoccupation with scientific and materialistic concerns, to the neglect of the humanities and the moral realities. And nothing that a man can possibly

do with his life today is to be compared with the chance he has to help change men's basic ways of thinking about life.

There are many young men who admit all this, and who are really anxious above all else to help change the world's ways of thinking. They believe that the one true God is the Father of Jesus of the gospels and that such a God can save the world. But they know that serving him means changing many of our ways of thinking and living. And they feel that the thing cannot be said by a minister from a pulpit because the plainest fact about churches is to be found in a line of that hymn which says, "Nothing changes here." In short they are afraid of orthodox theology, and of respectable conservative capitalism in the pews which they despair of ever making truly Christian. They are anxious to spend their lives doing what they think the ministry ought to do, but fear that churches do not offer them a chance to speak and act freely in the effort to change the world's way of thinking.

I can only report my own sober conclusions as to this absolutely vital matter. That men resent and resist the necessity for changing their ways of thinking and living is perfectly plain. Churches share in this temper, they have no monopoly of it. But the picture of the minister as a man whose soul is not his own and whose lips are sealed, living as the only remaining moral slave and coward in a world of otherwise absolutely free men is a grotesque caricature of the facts. If a man decides not to run away into a desert and live there forever in an easy and empty freedom, but to live in this world and to try to keep his own independence in the face of the stolid inertia of human institutions, liberty is costly everywhere, in the ministry or out of it. It is no easier to be a free man in the law or medicine or the teaching profession, in a bank or in the editorial room of a newspaper or in politics, than it is in the ministry. All things considered it may be harder, because the world does not expect of the layman quite that integrity that it expects, rightly or wrongly, from the minister. Do not think for a moment that merely because you have decided not to enter the ministry you have insured your moral self-respect and independence for the rest of your life.

The fight has only begun and the case will be fought out on other grounds where defeat is just as possible and perhaps even more probable.

My own observation is that if a man does not abuse his opportunities in a pulpit, to rant wildly at things as they are or to indulge in sentimental utopian pipe-dreams, but thinks soberly and with a generous and hopeful mind about the changes in men's ways of thinking and living that Christianity asks, there is no place where he is so free to say what he really believes as in a pulpit. He will meet opposition and criticism, it is true, but he does not escape them by keeping out of a pulpit. And somehow deep in the common conscience, beneath all superficial resentment and worldly opposition, there is the conviction that just that is what the Church is for — to change men's ways of thinking and living. A disgruntled parishioner once complained that Newman's preaching interfered with the way he did business. And Newman answered, "Sir, it is the business of the church to interfere with people." In the profoundest sense of the word that is true, and the world knows and silently admits it. Religion does interfere with life, radically and deliberately. But if that interference is made in the spirit of wisdom and charity, rather than of truculent abuse, I am prepared to defend the proposition that a man can call his soul his own in the ministry today and speak what is on his mind quite as freely from a liberal pulpit as from any other single point of vantage. Only, all this rests on the man's patent sincerity and humility and charity. Without these qualifications he will never be a free man in the ministry. But that is simply another way of saying that he would be a moral coward everywhere else.

Something of that sort, then, is the preaching work of the modern minister; to think aloud about life, so that he shall help perplexed men find themselves and say out through him what is in them, to the end that they may finally change their points of view and get new values for old in experience and in the organization of society — in short to make men believe that God is there, that he cares what they do, that he has a stake in them, and that "He must win the day."

There remains for final mention the other side of the minister's duty, that commonly called "parish work." This work at its broadest is always a piece of social engineering. It has to do with all the human and humane relationships of a community. It is an effort to tie up and enlist the resources of the members of a church for the effective service of the whole community through all of the organized philanthropic agencies. Parish administration is social service in the large, and concedes nothing to any of the secular social agencies. Hardly a day passes but a minister has to attempt to relate himself and his parish resources to the total social task of the community. Parish work, today, always involves finding contacts and outlets for a few hundred persons who ought to be seeking and helping their less fortunate fellow townsmen or citizens. Every minister is pledged in advance, both personally and as the commander of the time and money of other persons, to the major philanthropies of his community. He is seriously trying to organize his parish so that it can get to work at closer range and with greater effectiveness in the world at large, and in absolute coöperation with all the existing agencies.

But more definitely than all this the aim of parish work is simply to enable a man to know intimately and at first hand the lives and needs of all sorts and conditions of other men. There is a certain amount of dull routine drudgery to be done in the way of parish visiting. At its worst it is a matter of tea cups and small talk. I do not know that it is any duller or more dreary than a good deal of routine drudgery in a shop or an office or on a doctor's rounds. John's measles and Mary's lessons are just as much a dull routine to the doctor or the teacher as they are to the minister. It is drudgery, put it any way you will, and a wise man ends by accepting drudgery as an inevitable part of any serious life.

But the end and aim of all this drudgery is to enable a man to know the lives of other human beings in detail, so that he is in a position to help them when they really need help. Samuel Barnett, the pioneer social settlement worker who founded Toynbee Hall, said that the best work that was being done in East London in his time was done, not by the workers who

had broad impersonal schemes for social reform, but by those who were willing to take time and trouble with individuals. That is true of every profession and every piece of human service. The thing always comes down in the end to concrete human cases, and the solution is found not in sweeping programs or large generalities, but in a man's willingness to take time and trouble with individuals. A man will not be a good minister who is not willing to do this. But neither will he be a good doctor, or a good teacher, or a good lawyer. I am more and more impressed by the fact that, as this world goes, the most successful professional men, the men who stand clearly at the top of their calling, are the men who are willing to take time and trouble with individuals. Your good specialist in medicine always does this. And if he is not willing to do it, because he thinks he is too busy to pay that price, he will just miss success in his life-work.

Now that is what parish-work comes down to in the end. It is simply the willingness to take time and trouble with individuals, some inside a parish and others outside, who need that kind of help which religion brings to people who are in trouble. Those needs are, on the whole, the deepest and most imperative in human life. They are the needs of hope and courage and friendship and the willingness to go bravely on. Every minister is in duty bound to try to meet those needs, man to man and face to face. And preaching never takes priority over that kind of intimate, patient, hand-to-hand service of the world.

I think of a man who stumbled up to me the other night at the close of service. He had been wandering about the streets in the dark, had seen the lighted windows of the church, and had turned in there in the hope that he might find help. He did not ask for food or lodging or money. He said that he was on the verge of committing suicide and was afraid he would be driven to it before the night was over. And he wanted to find someone to stop him and save him. Is that emergency a trivial or fanciful one? No call that could ever be put to any man anywhere could be clearer or more imperious and challenging than the call of that frightened human life in its ex-

tremity. The kind of help that a minister ought to give, and can give, to such a need yields nothing, either in its reality or in the delicacy of its technique, to anything that a surgeon, or a lawyer, or a business man has to do to help this world.

The time comes, and comes frequently, in the life of the parish minister when he must enter the room that the doctor or surgeon has left because the art of healing can do no more, or when he is confronted with the angry and tangled problems of human relationships which have defied the solutions of the law, or when he must serve as the recipient of those confidences of the moral life which troubled human beings have to share with a friend. The work of the minister in these intimate and profoundly serious experiences yields absolutely nothing in its human importance or its human opportunity to the work of any other man. Superficially, parish work seems to the world a matter of trivial small talk, but actually it becomes, as a man's sympathies and insights develop, a patient grappling with those deepest and hardest problems of living which only religion can hope to solve. And the usually despised parish work of the average minister, when followed out to its ultimate conclusions, calls for the type of man who concedes nothing, either by way of opportunity or qualification, to any of his fellows in the great professions.

Of the compensations of the ministry it is difficult to speak, in advance of experience itself. A man may enter the ministry today, hoping to earn a competence through all his working years. If he is a man of real ability he will have no difficulty in assuring for his home margins of comfort. And he is entitled to the advance assurance that however laggard individual parishes may be, and however reluctant to advance ministerial salaries to meet advancing standards and rising prices, the Protestant churches as a whole are facing this problem seriously and propose to set their ministers beyond hardship and anxiety, both during their working years and in their old age. The ministry does not commend itself to those whose only interest in life is the lure of a large income. But less and less is it shutting out those who feel deeply their moral responsibility to provide adequate support for a home with all its normal



charges, and who are rightly unwilling to make the members of that home the victims of their inability to command a salary adequate for these needs. In short the average man does make a living in the ministry, and the more than average man receives a compensation which puts him beyond anxiety and assures him of normal provision for the needs of a family.

But the more abiding compensations of the ministry are to be reckoned among life's "intangibles." The ministry brings to every man who follows it loyally the double compensation that accrues to a life lived with great ideas and profound truths on the one hand and with concrete human needs on the other hand. And a life lived in the service of God and of one's fellow men is its own best reward, in its own coin.